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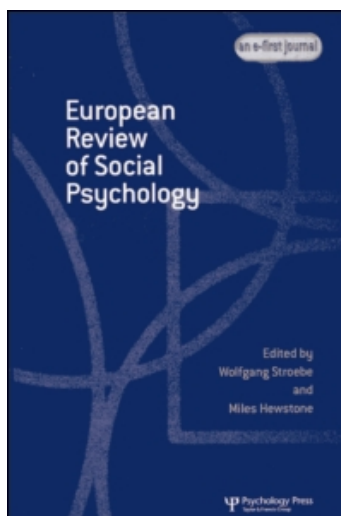
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### Forgiveness in personal relationships: Its malleability and powerful consequences

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## Forgiveness in personal relationships: Its malleability and powerful consequences

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The present chapter examines the nature and consequences of forgiveness. First we provide an overview of studies suggesting that the level of forgiveness tends to be quite malleable, as indicated by a number of empirical findings demonstrating that situational cues can subtly influence an individual's level of forgiveness. Extending the general view on forgiveness as a deliberative and intentional act, we review evidence indicating that forgiveness is at least partly determined by automatic and unconscious processes. In the second part of the chapter we provide an overview of studies demonstrating that, despite the notion that level of forgiveness can be malleable, seemingly small fluctuations in forgiveness can still have profound consequences both at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, and may have generalised effects on prosocial behaviour over people and situations. We conclude by proposing a model that not only summarises many of the findings reviewed in this chapter, but also may serve as a heuristic framework for testing predictions about the impact of forgiveness on individuals, relationships, and beyond.

The last decade has witnessed an enormous increase in social psychological interest in the concept of forgiveness. As a case in point, when the first author started his PhD project in 1998 on this topic, a PsychInfo-search for “forgiveness” resulted in less than 100 hits. Only a handful of these hits

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concerned articles in which forgiveness was the principal variable of investigation. Today, a decade later, more than 2000 journal articles, book articles, and dissertations on this topic have been published.

Why is this case? Why has the topic been neglected for so long, and why has it attracted so many researchers in the past decade? Some of the reasons given for the relative neglect of forgiveness are the problems that may arise in gathering reliable data about this topic, and the relative focus on constructs that may explain why relationships are not maintained (e.g., negative reciprocity, demand-withdraw patterns; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001b). However, once a few published articles appeared in the major journals of the field (e.g., McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), researchers became aware of the possible powerful role that forgiveness may play in several aspects of our lives.

What might the consequences of forgiveness be? We suggest that the impact of forgiveness may operate at three distinct levels of analysis. First, at the intrapersonal level, we suggest that high levels of forgiveness are—at least under certain circumstances—associated with elevated psychological as well as physical well-being. Second, at the interpersonal level, we suggest that forgiveness is generally positively associated with relationship well-being and persistence, and that it may even play a *key* role in the maintenance of close relationships. And third, at a broader level, we suggest that the effects of forgiveness may sometimes even generalise, or go beyond the individual and his or her relationship with the offender (referred to in this article as the generalised level). That is, the “psychological state” of forgiveness may motivate prosocial behaviour towards third parties.

We review evidence relevant to the three-level impact of forgiveness later. For now, the important questions are: What drives forgiveness, and how exactly do people come to forgive an offender? Not surprisingly, these questions have received a fair amount of theoretical and empirical attention. A view generally—implicitly or explicitly—endorsed in the forgiveness literature is that responding in a forgiving manner after one has been damaged by a relationship partner is the result of an *intentional* and *deliberative* process. For example, people are supposed to be more likely to forgive their offenders after they have discounted internal causes, and have formed more external explanations for the offence (Finkel, Rusbult, Kamashiro, & Hannon, 2002). In a similar vein, people are more likely to forgive when thinking about the offence leads to attributions that the offender was not responsible for his or her deed (Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Such attributions are then supposed to reduce the negative feelings associated with the offender, and to re-instigate goodwill and positive feelings towards the offender. Recent research by McCullough, Root, and Cohen (2006) demonstrated that participants who were instructed to write about personal benefits resulting from a transgression subsequently

reported higher levels of forgiveness (compared to control conditions in which participants wrote about a topic unrelated to the offence or wrote about negative features of the offence). Writing about the benefits led to increased cognitive processing of the event (e.g., greater insight, clearer cause-and-effect relations, and so on), which in turn facilitated forgiveness. Such findings also suggest that deliberative processes occurring after an offence can facilitate forgiveness, and that forgiveness may sometimes involve thoughtful and effortful processes. These are just a few examples of research that has focused on the role of deliberative processes by which people come to respond in a forgiving manner.

Relatedly, forgiveness is often assumed to be the result of an intentional *decision*. That is, people are believed to be more likely to forgive when they consciously and actively seek to overcome their negative thoughts, feelings, and behavioural tendencies in order to regain a more positive stance towards the transgressor, despite his or her hurtful actions (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 2001). This view of forgiveness is further illustrated by a large number of both scientific books and self-help books with titles such as “Forgiveness is a Choice” (Enright, 2001), “Choosing Forgiveness: Your Journey to Freedom” (Leigh, 2006), and “Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart” (Casarjian, 1992). In short, the general tenet in the literature is undeniably that forgiveness is often seen as a deliberative and intentional decision, and the state of forgiveness that is derived from this decision can in turn lead to several positive outcomes, both at the individual and relationship level.

Extending this notion of forgiveness as a deliberative process, in the present chapter we argue that forgiveness is often and at least to some extent determined by unconscious and implicit processes. Certainly, people sometimes actively attempt to forgive their offenders—for example, they may consciously decide that they should let go of their bitterness and anger towards the offender, and this decision may actually lead to the transformation of negative feelings and thoughts into more positive feelings and thoughts towards the offending relationship partner. Thus we do not discard this possibility. However, we argue that a decision to forgive does not necessarily result in the dissipation of negative feelings towards the offender. Indeed, it may be very difficult for people to overcome their negative feelings towards an offender, despite one’s consciously chosen inclination to forgive. Also, a person may assume that she has forgiven an offender at a certain point in time, but may still experience negative feelings afterwards, for example when something reminds her of the incident. And, rather than being a conscious decision, forgiveness may occur apparently in a rather spontaneous manner. For example, if asked, a person may indeed respond that he has forgiven the

offender if he is not experiencing any negative feelings towards the offender any more, even though he has not intentionally decided to forgive the offender.

In the present chapter we argue that the processes underlying forgiveness cannot be fully understood without taking into account the unconscious and implicit processes that may be at play in influencing forgiveness. As we will explain, this proposition is largely based on the empirical observation that level of forgiveness is relatively *malleable*. That is, level of forgiveness regarding a past offence tends to fluctuate considerably over time (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). For example, a person may sometimes feel that he or she has forgiven an offender to a large extent, and somewhat later the person may again experience negative feelings regarding the same past offence. Or, although a person may feel that he or she cannot forgive a past offence, at a certain point in time he or she may feel goodwill for the offender, and feelings of revenge and anger may have largely vanished. As we will demonstrate, such fluctuations may often be the result of subtle and implicit situational cues ("hidden forces"), which are likely to influence a person's level of forgiveness outside conscious awareness.

The goals of the present chapter are twofold. The first goal relates to the nature of forgiveness, and the processes underlying it. First we will provide evidence from experimental research for the proposition that level of forgiveness regarding a past offence is—at least to some extent—malleable, and that this malleability is often caused by unconscious and implicit processes. We will then discuss various possibilities for the respective roles of deliberative and automatic processes in influencing forgiveness.

The second goal is to provide an overview of recent research findings highlighting the "power" of forgiveness. Although levels of forgiveness may fluctuate over time and may often be subtly influenced by the environment, we suggest that the "state of forgiveness" may exert powerful effects on the individual, the relationship, and beyond the relationship. In the second part of the chapter we will discuss the consequences of forgiveness at the *intrapersonal* level, *interpersonal* level, and *generalised* level. That is, we will address respectively the relationship between forgiveness and individual well-being, between forgiveness and relationship functioning and well-being, and between forgiveness and generalised prosocial responses not directed towards the offender. We do not wish to provide an exhaustive overview of the effects forgiveness can have at each of these levels. Rather, our aim is to provide compelling evidence for the powerful role of forgiveness at each level. We conclude by providing a basic model in which the effects of forgiveness are summarised, and by suggesting how the different intrapersonal, interpersonal, and generalised effects of forgiveness may be interrelated.

## DEFINING FORGIVENESS

Given the already-mentioned vast number of scientific articles on forgiveness, it should not come as a surprise that a number of different definitions of the concept have been provided. In a thorough review of the literature, McCullough et al. (2001b) summarise these definitions and identify the differences and similarities among them. Most relevant to the present article, the extant definitions seem to differ in the degree to which forgiveness is characterised as an *intrapersonal* or as an *interpersonal* phenomenon. That is, some scholars have argued that forgiveness can best be understood as a prosocial change (or motivational state that derives from this change) that takes place within the person who has been offended, while others conceptualise forgiveness in terms of behavioural changes towards the offender.

A definition provided by Finkel and his colleagues illustrates the interpersonal focus on forgiveness that some scholars have employed in their research: "Forgiveness is the victim's resumption of pre-betrayal behavioural tendencies – the tendency to forego vengeance and other destructive patterns of interaction, instead behaving towards the perpetrator in a positive and constructive manner" (Finkel, Rusbult, Hannon, Kumashiro, & Childs, 2002, p. 957; see also Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005). Research that originates from this definition of forgiveness logically operationalises forgiveness in behavioural terms, and examines immediate behavioural responses to a potential act of betrayal. For instance, in a study by Finkel et al. (2002) forgiveness was operationalised as a cooperative response following a competitive response of the interaction partner in a social dilemma game.

In contrast, McCullough and colleagues (2001b) have defined forgiveness in intrapersonal terms as an intra-individual prosocial change towards a transgressor, situated in an interpersonal context. In the current chapter we take a similar perspective, and argue that in essence forgiveness can be defined in terms of *a reduction in negative feelings, and a recovery of positive feelings towards an offender after an offence has taken place*. Note that this definition distinguishes forgiveness from other related constructs, such as accommodation, condoning, or excusing an offence (see also Fincham, 2000). For example, accommodation, which is defined as reacting constructively in response to a partner's negative act (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), does not necessarily involve an *intrapersonal* change of feelings towards the offender. Moreover, an individual may excuse or condone an offensive act while not having experienced any negative feelings in the first place. In contrast to a purely interpersonal view of forgiveness, it seems that this definition is also more consistent with a layperson's view of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2001b).



A person, let us say John, who says: "I have forgiven Cathleen," arguably means that he has internally forgiven Cathleen; his negative feelings towards Cathleen have been largely reduced, despite her hurtful act. Importantly, we argue that the experience of forgiveness is associated with the reduction of negative feelings towards the offender, but that forgiveness is not necessarily the result of an intentional decision to forgive the offender, but rather may (or may not) occur unintentionally.

Having defined forgiveness as a reduction of negative feelings towards the offender (and recovery of positive feelings), the question then becomes when and why this intrapersonal change or state does or does not have further intrapersonal consequences, or when and why it would or would not affect interpersonal processes. For example, under what circumstances are high levels of forgiveness associated with increased well-being, and how exactly is forgiveness related to improved interpersonal functioning? To examine the effects of forgiveness on well-being, interpersonal motivation and behaviour, and general prosocial motivation one needs to understand, first and foremost, the intrapersonal character of forgiveness. That is, we need to know more about the nature—the mechanics and "workings"—of forgiveness to understand its consequences at the three levels discussed earlier.

It is important to note that forgiveness in the context of extreme acts of violence, such as rape, incest, or murder, exceeds the scope of the present chapter. Rather, we focus on forgiveness following relatively moderate to severe violations of relationship norms that may occur in relationships with close others like friends, family, or romantic partners, or that may occur in relationships with non-close others. Indeed, when a best friend is gossiping, when someone betrays his or her intimate partner, or when a good friend does not keep his or her promises, such instances can be rather painful for people, and it may be difficult to forgive the relationship partner. Essentially, any act of an interaction partner that evokes negative feelings requires a certain degree of forgiveness, i.e., the reduction of these negative feelings and recovery of positive feelings.

## THE MALLEABILITY OF FORGIVENESS

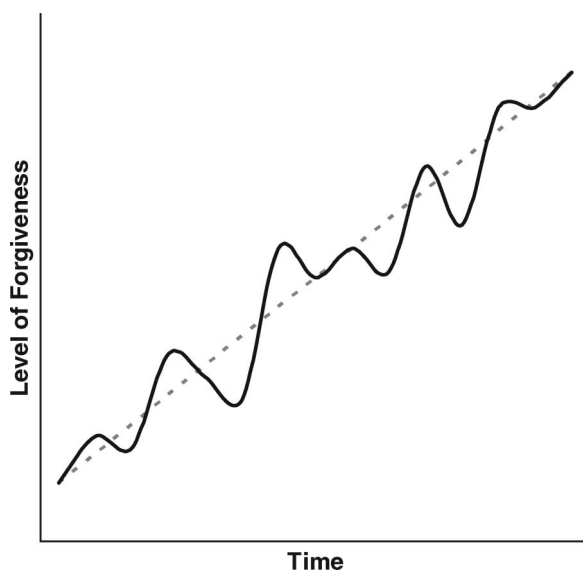
An offence by definition induces negative feelings and thoughts on the part of the victim. It is therefore not surprising that, if offended by a relationship partner, a person's initial response often is to retaliate the hurt, and/or to avoid the offender (McCullough et al., 1998). The dissipation of such negative feelings and thoughts, and regaining benevolent feelings and thoughts, is a process that evolves over time (McCullough et al., 2003; McCullough & Root, 2005). As demonstrated by McCullough and colleagues (2003), level of forgiveness (as operationalised in their studies as a reduction in revenge and avoidance motivation, and an increase in



benevolence motivation towards the offender) tends to increase linearly over time. However, at different points over time, level of forgiveness clearly fluctuates. That is, level of forgiveness often deviates from what would be expected based on the linear trend. Sometimes level of forgiveness exceeds the linear trend line, and sometimes level of forgiveness is below the trend line (see Figure 1). Put differently, a person's level of forgiveness regarding a single past offence may rise and fall.

A certain level of forgiveness at any particular point in time has been labelled a *temporary* level of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2003). What determines such temporary fluctuations in forgiveness? Why does an offence sometimes seem to be forgiven, while at other times level of forgiveness again declines? This question has received only very limited theoretical as well as empirical attention. This is unfortunate, since such temporary ups and downs in forgiveness can have significant consequences both for the individual and the relationship, as will be extensively discussed later.

Are such fluctuations caused by conscious and deliberative (e.g., consciously made causal attribution) processes? For example, would a victim's attribution that the offence was not intentional at T1 result in relatively high levels of forgiveness, while his or her belief that the offence was intentional after all at T2 would result in relatively low levels of forgiveness? And when the person at T3 again thinks the offence was not



**Figure 1.** Forgiveness as it unfolds over time, with increases and declines in level of forgiveness at different points in time.

intentional, would that again increase levels of forgiveness? Clearly, it is possible that at the different points in time different pieces of information become available that may result in different attributions regarding the offender's intentions, which in turn would influence one's level of forgiveness. Or, people may focus on different pieces of information at the different points in time, with some information ("He had a bad day at the office") resulting in higher forgiveness, while other information ("But gosh, it was my birthday!") may lead to lower forgiveness. It is also possible that the very same pieces of information are interpreted differently at different points in time. For example, a failure to keep a secret may be attributed to a "weak moment", or it could be explained in terms of a deliberate attempt to hurt one's reputation. Even offences that are unambiguously unacceptable can often be interpreted in more benevolent ways (i.e., "Compared to other men, he is not so bad after all"). Thus, such latitude of interpretation provides a person with the means to adopt various perspectives to interpret the offence, which are likely to be associated with different levels of forgiveness at different points in time.

The important question then becomes: why would a certain offence be interpreted in such a way that it leads to higher levels of forgiveness at one point in time, while at other times the very same offence is interpreted such that it results in lower levels of forgiveness? Or why would a person at some point in time focus on discounting information (e.g., "He had a bad day at work"), while at other times he or she would disregard this kind of information? One of the factors that may help to explain such fluctuations concerns changes within the relationship with the offending partner. For example, although a past offence may be forgiven to a great extent, level of forgiveness may decline when the partner repeats the offence. Or, level of forgiveness regarding a past offence may decline after having an argument with the partner regarding an unrelated issue.

In the current chapter, however, our focus is not on such possible changes within the relationship. Instead, we focus on the role of subtle environmental input that may unconsciously affect a person's level of forgiveness. As already noted, we suggest that fluctuations in forgiveness are often the result of situational triggers that may influence one's level of forgiveness outside of the individual's conscious awareness. As such, people may sometimes *think* that they volitionally and consciously decide to forgive an offender. That is, although they may be very much aware of the explicit positive interpretations they make of the partner's offensive behaviour, they may often not be aware of the situational influences that guide these interpretations, and may not be aware of how certain situational cues may guide their level of forgiveness. We will now turn to reviewing a number of recent empirical findings in support of this notion.

## Priming effects on temporary levels of forgiveness

The role of subtle contextual influences on forgiveness has been examined in detail in our own research program (e.g., Karremans & Aarts, 2007; Karremans & Smith, 2008; Karremans & Van Lange, 2005; see also research by Wohl & McGrath, 2007). Specifically, support for this basic idea is derived from research on the relationship between justice and forgiveness, closeness and forgiveness, power and forgiveness, and the role of time on forgiveness. We will briefly discuss each of these lines of research below. For each study we provide some theoretical background before discussing the findings that are of relevance to the proposition that forgiveness can be subtly influenced by situational cues—and is thus malleable.

Most of the studies have used priming techniques to influence temporary levels of forgiveness. The general idea guiding these studies is that priming increases (directly or indirectly) the accessibility of certain motives or values that should be theoretically related to forgiveness. After participants have been exposed to the prime, either the inclination to forgive certain offences is measured, or the actual level of forgiveness regarding a past offence is measured. Thus, the accessibility of certain concepts should subsequently affect level of forgiveness.

*Justice values and forgiveness.* With the rise of forgiveness research, forgiveness scholars started to ask how forgiveness and justice are related (e.g., Exline, Worthington, Jr., Hill, & McCullough, 2003). For example, how are people able to forgive their offenders, when at the same time people's justice concerns seem so fundamentally important? Would people only be willing to forgive after justice has been done? Or are people able to set aside their feelings of injustice, for example for the sake of the relationship with the offender? Some have argued that forgiveness and justice concerns are often incompatible (e.g., Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Indeed, if people did exclusively view justice in terms of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (i.e., retributive justice), justice and forgiveness would likely be negatively related.

However, the justice literature suggests that people's justice conceptions are much broader than retributive justice alone. In fact, people often think of justice as a prosocial value, emphasising equality between people, fair distributions of outcomes (i.e., distributive justice), and fair procedures that lead to certain outcomes (i.e., procedural justice; for an overview, see Tyler, 1987). Thus, based on the justice literature, justice and forgiveness, both being prosocial rather than proself values, may actually be positively related.

We examined these competing hypotheses in a series of studies (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005). In a first study, to cognitively activate the concept of justice, we simply asked our participants in the experimental condition to

write down the thoughts that came to mind when thinking of the concept of justice. In a control condition, participants did not write about justice. In line with the notion that people's general conceptions of justice are much more prosocial-oriented than often assumed in the forgiveness literature, most people wrote down descriptions of justice that predominantly matched prosocial notions of justice (e.g., "Everyone should be treated equally"). In fact, only a few participants explicitly and exclusively referred to justice as retaliation, getting even, or other retributive-justice-related concepts. After writing down their thoughts about justice, participants completed the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (TNTF), a scenario-based measure of people's inclinations to forgive, developed and validated by Berry and colleagues (Berry, Worthington, Parrot, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001). In our studies participants read four of the five original scenarios of the TNTF, and were asked to imagine that the situation as described in the scenario happened to them. For example, in one scenario the participant imagines that a colleague, who is a former classmate from high school, has been gossiping about him or her to other colleagues about something that happened in high school. After reading each scenario, the participant indicated to what extent they would forgive the offender. The results of this study suggested a positive link between justice conceptions and forgiveness. That is, those participants who had been thinking of the concept of justice gave higher forgiveness ratings than participants who had not been thinking of justice.

By demonstrating that the activation of justice values can influence forgiveness, this study supports the notion that situational triggers can lead to different levels of forgiveness. However, it is possible that participants in the first study had been aware of the link between the writing-about-justice task and the forgiveness measure. In a second and third study participants were primed with justice values in a subtler manner by means of a symbolic representation of justice. Specifically, in both studies participants were primed with an image of *Justitia*, the Roman goddess of justice. In one study participants were first exposed to the image of *Justitia* (versus a non-justice-related image, i.e., a trumpet), after which they completed the TNTF, which assessed their inclinations to forgive. In the other study participants simply completed the TNTF; however, in the experimental condition this forgiveness measure was printed on a sheet of paper containing a watermark depicting the image of *Justitia*. Thus in both studies participants were subtly primed with the image of *Justitia* in order to activate the concept of justice. Importantly, in neither study did any of the participants guess that the image of *Justitia* had anything to do with their responses on the forgiveness measure. In fact, most participants in the "watermark study" reported afterwards that they had not even consciously noticed the watermark.

However, both studies revealed that priming with *Justitia* (i.e., a justice symbol) resulted in higher levels of forgiveness (compared to various control

conditions). Apart from providing a better understanding of the relationship between justice values and forgiveness, more generally these findings support the notion that at least people's inclinations to forgive are influenced by contextual factors of which people have no awareness. Participants may have used several heuristics or logical reasons to respond with a certain level of forgiveness to the hypothetical scenarios of the TNTF; however, what they did not know was that the *primes* at least partly determined their level of forgiveness.

*The automatic closeness–forgiveness link.* In another line of research suggesting the malleability of forgiveness and the role of implicit and unconscious processes, Karremans and Aarts (2007) examined the link between relationship closeness and forgiveness. Previous research had already suggested that relationship closeness is one of the most important antecedents of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; cf. Finkel et al., 2002). The more close or committed people feel towards an offending relationship partner, the more they are willing to forgive the partner. However, most previous research has emphasised the role of deliberative attribution processes in accounting for this link. People who are more close or committed to their partner are more likely to make benign attributions regarding the partner's behaviour, which will in turn promote forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002).

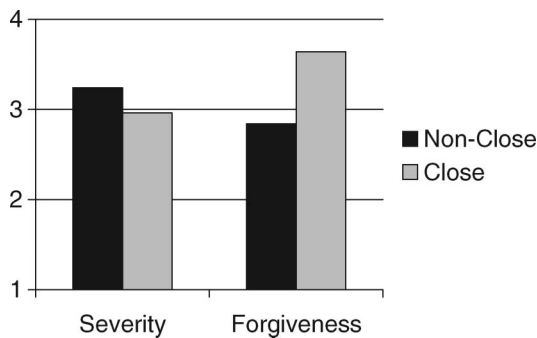
Karremans and Aarts (2007) reasoned that over the course of a close and committed relationship, people may “learn” that a forgiving response (as compared to a retaliatory response) towards a partner's destructive act often results in relatively positive outcomes (including individual as well as relationship well-being, see below: Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Such positive outcomes that are associated with the forgiving response may reinforce a person to respond with forgiving rather than retributive tendencies in response to destructive acts of the partner. If offences occur regularly in a close relationship (which is very often the case: Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002), forgiving responses may therefore eventually occur in a relatively habitual and non-deliberative fashion. Put differently, forgiveness may become part of the mental representation of the relationship with the close other (Baldwin, 1992; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

To test this basic prediction, Karremans and Aarts (2007) conducted a series of experiments. If forgiveness is indeed part of the mental representation of the relationship with the close other, cognitively activating this mental representation would result in generally higher inclinations to forgive (cf. Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). In the first two studies participants were told that the researchers were interested in what kind of behaviours people are more and less inclined to forgive. To examine this, participants

were asked to indicate their inclination to forgive for a number of offensive behaviours (e.g., insulting, yelling, lying, etc.), which would appear one by one on the screen. However, just before the presentation of each offensive behaviour, to activate the mental representation of either a close or non-close relationship, participants were subliminally (i.e., outside conscious awareness) exposed to either the name of a close other, or the name of a non-close other, respectively. Participants had provided these names in an earlier phase of the experiment. Also, in the first study a control condition was included in which participants were primed with a random letter string.

In support of our central prediction, participants who were primed with the name of a close other responded with significantly higher inclinations to forgive compared to participants in both the non-close prime and the control condition. These findings are again in line with the proposition that level of forgiveness can be subtly influenced by environmental cues: participants in these studies were not aware that they had been primed with a close other, yet they exhibited higher levels of forgiveness in this case. It is important to note that in the second study we also included a condition in which participants did not rate the level of forgiveness regarding the offensive behaviours, but instead rated the severity of each offensive behaviour. In this condition we found no significant effects of the close versus non-close primes, indicating that participants were not simply “pulled” towards the more positive side of the scale as a consequence of the close other prime. This suggests that closeness did not just prime any positivity, but indeed specifically affected participants’ inclinations to forgive (see Figure 2).

*Power and forgiveness.* A recent line of research by Karremans and Smith (2008) suggests that one’s level of forgiveness can be subtly influenced



**Figure 2.** Level of forgiveness, and level of severity, as a result of priming the name of a close other versus the name of a non-close other (data from Karremans & Aarts, 2007, Study 2).

by one's current level of experienced power. So far, the relationship between power and forgiveness has received only very limited attention in the literature (for an exception, see Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006). However, given the fact that the experience of power (or the lack of power) is inherently rooted in one's relationships with others, power is likely to affect how people respond to offences that may occur in these relationships. The possession or experience of power has often been associated, theoretically and empirically, with largely self-oriented motivation and behaviour ("power corrupts"), suggesting that power might be negatively associated with forgiveness. However, recent insights into the basic processes associated with power suggest that, under certain circumstances, power may actually lead to pro-relationship responses. A basic effect of power is that it makes people who experience it more likely to be action-oriented towards pursuing their goals (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). If one's goal is to act in a pro-relationship manner, high power (as compared to low power) may then actually facilitate this. Indeed, Chen, Lee Chai, and Bargh (2001) demonstrated that people who have a chronic goal to respond to the needs and interests of others (i.e., communal-oriented people) are more likely to distribute rewards fairly when they are high in power than when they are low in power.

Extending this line of research, Karremans and Smith (2008) reasoned that if forgiveness is indeed functional in maintaining a relationship, power should facilitate forgiveness but only towards others to whom one is strongly committed. That is, because strong commitment by definition implies that one is strongly motivated to maintain the relationship, people experiencing high power (compared to low power) should be better able to focus on this long-term goal, and should therefore be more willing to forgive in the context of such relationships. This hypothesis was tested in a series of studies. Most relevant for the purposes of the present article, in one study participants were experientially primed with power, after which their inclination to forgive strong commitment and weak commitment others was measured. That is, in one condition participants were asked to recall an instance in which they had power over others (i.e., the high-power condition), in another condition they recalled an instance in which others had power over them (i.e., the low-power condition). As previous research has shown, such primes do indeed temporarily induce differential levels of experienced power (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Smith & Trope, 2006). Subsequently, participants reported their inclinations to forgive a number of hypothetical offences, in some of which the protagonist was someone to whom they were strongly committed (e.g., a good friend), and others where the protagonist was someone to whom they were weakly committed (e.g., an acquaintance). In line with predictions, participants who were experientially primed with high power (compared to low power) displayed higher

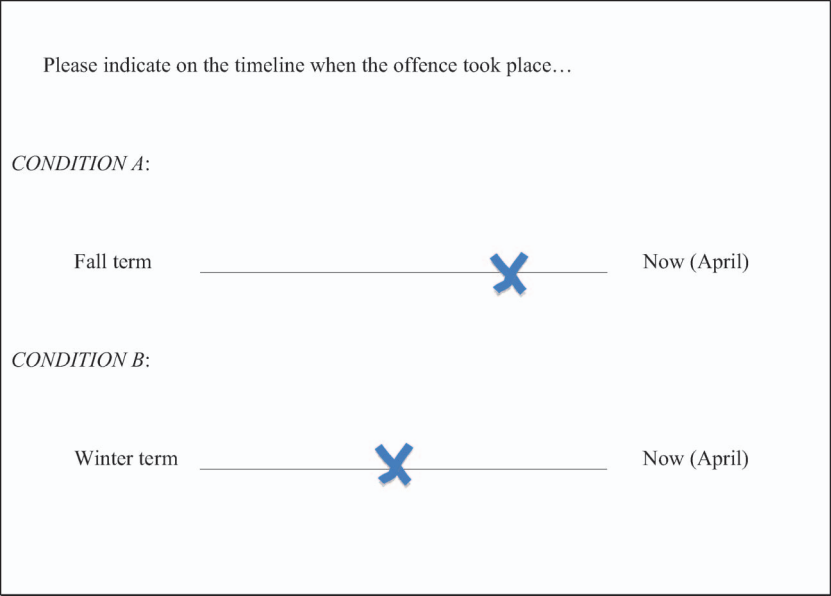


inclinations to forgive, but only regarding the scenarios in which a strong-commitment other behaved badly. Power did not affect inclinations to forgive weak-commitment others. Thus, again, such findings provide evidence for the idea that one's level of forgiveness can be subtly influenced by situational cues that are essentially unrelated to the offence itself.

Notably, this basic finding was replicated regarding real-life offences. In a study in which participants were asked to recall a past offence, their level of forgiveness was determined by an interaction between experienced power in the relationship and level of commitment towards the offender. That is, when commitment to the offending partner was relatively strong, power facilitated forgiveness, whereas this effect was not observed in relationships of weak commitment (Karremans & Smith, 2008).

*Temporal distance and forgiveness.* One final example of the malleability of forgiveness comes from a recent series of studies by Wohl and McGrath (2007). They examined how forgiveness can be influenced by a person's subjectively experienced temporal distance from the offence. As alluded to earlier, there seems a fair amount of truth in the saying "time heals all wounds", as level of forgiveness generally seems to increase as time passes (McCullough & Root, 2005). However, Wohl and McGrath (2007) did not examine the objective temporal distance from the offence, but experimentally manipulated people's *subjective* perception of the elapsed time since the offence. In one study participants were asked to report their level of forgiveness regarding an offence that had happened about 1 month ago. For the sake of the argument (as soon will become clear), let us suppose that the study was run in April, and the offence thus had taken place sometime in March. Before participants reported their level of forgiveness, the subjective experience of temporal distance was manipulated as follows: Participants in one condition were asked to indicate when the offence took place by placing a mark on a time line running from Fall (autumn) term until Now (i.e., April), while in the other condition participants were asked to do the same but now the time line ran from Winter term until Now (i.e. April). As can be seen in Figure 3, in this manner the offence seemed—visually—to have happened longer ago in the latter condition than in the former condition. This procedure did indeed influence participants' subjective experience of how long ago the offence had taken place (on a scale ranging from *recently* to a *long time ago*).

This very subtle manipulation of temporal distance resulted in a significant effect on one's level of forgiveness regarding the offence. Although for all participants the actual time since the offence was the same (i.e., about a month ago), participants who indicated when the offence took place on the Fall term/Now timeline exhibited higher levels of forgiveness than participants who indicated when the offence took place on the Winter



**Figure 3.** Manipulation of subjective time since the offence (based on Wohl & McGrath, 2007). In the example, in both cases the offence took place about a month ago, but visually it seems longer ago in Condition B than in Condition A.

term/Now timeline. Apparently, the subjective rather than objective amount of time that has passed since the offence determines an individual's current level of forgiveness. Although the mechanism underlying this effect is not exactly clear and remains an interesting issue for future research, these findings provide strong support for the proposition that level of forgiveness can be influenced by subtle environmental cues, without people being aware of this influence. In fact, whereas the studies reviewed above dealt with forgiving *inclinations* towards hypothetical scenarios, the study by Wohl and McGrath (2007) demonstrates that even level of forgiveness regarding an actual past offence can fairly easily be influenced by subtle variations in the environment.

*Summary.* Together, the studies reviewed above provide strong support for the general proposition that levels of forgiveness can be very malleable. In each of the studies, some situational trigger—justice salience, a close other or power prime, or a temporal distance manipulation—significantly affected levels of forgiveness towards perpetrators of both hypothetical as well as actual offences. Furthermore, some of these studies provided compelling support for the notion that such situational cues can influence

forgiveness without people being aware of it. The subliminal close-other priming studies were most clear in this regard, although it is also very unlikely that people were aware of the influence of the experimental influences on forgiveness in the temporal distance studies, the power study, and the justice studies. It is important to note that in each of these studies the situational cue that influenced forgiveness was essentially *unrelated* to the offence. Put differently, although the situation was manipulated, the offence itself was held constant in each study.

### Theoretical implications: Deliberative and automatic processes in forgiveness

What are the implications of these findings for our understanding of the processes underlying forgiveness? What is the role of deliberative versus automatic processes in forgiveness? The above findings provide strong support for the notion that unconscious and automatic processes can influence forgiveness. This suggests, at least, that forgiveness is unlikely to be entirely the result of an intentional and deliberative decision. Although people may “feel” that they intentionally decide to forgive an offender, they may often not be aware of the situational cues that influence this seemingly volitional decision. At the same time, it should be recognised that previous research has suggested the role of deliberative processes in forgiveness, for example by demonstrating that more benign attributions regarding a partner’s offensive act are associated with higher levels of forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, 2000; Finkel et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 2006). Hence, it is important to consider the respective roles of deliberative and automatic processes in forgiveness. In the following paragraph we suggest several possibilities for how the two processes might be related in determining forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> Rather than providing a definitive model, we suggest several theoretical possibilities that hopefully serve as a basis for future exploration into this issue.

One possible interpretation of the fact that both automatic and deliberative processes have been found to be associated with forgiveness is that both processes act in a parallel, simultaneous fashion (cf. Smith & DeCoster, 2000). In the aftermath of an offence people may engage in making deliberative attributions regarding the offence, which may in turn

<sup>1</sup>Our distinction between the role of deliberative and automatic processes in forgiveness is based on a number of contemporary dual-process models in social psychology, which assume two qualitatively distinct processes (see Chaiken & Trope, 1999). We should note, however, that alternative models have been proposed (e.g., a model that assumes a single process; e.g., Kruglanski, Thompson, & Spiegel, 1999), and our reasoning does not deny the possibility of these latter models to help explain the forgiveness process.

influence their level of forgiveness of the offence. For example, an individual may consciously consider the amount of responsibility and intentionality of the offender, may consider past behaviour of the offender, and may consider what amends the offender has made. At the same time, while making such attributions, level of forgiveness may simultaneously be influenced by other more implicit and automatic sources of influence, such as the ones described in the above research review. For example, outside an individual's awareness, his or her personal values may guide forgiveness, or forgiveness may be influenced by unconscious goals of relationship persistence. As demonstrated in previous research, such goals do not necessarily have to be consciously activated in order to guide motivation and behaviour (e.g., Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2000). In such a model of parallel processing, the relative contribution of automatic and deliberative processes in forgiveness may, for example, depend on the severity of the offence. It is likely that deliberative processes play a relatively larger role to the extent that the offence is more severe, since the victim may then spontaneously engage in deliberative attributional thinking. Automatic and implicit processes may predominantly guide forgiveness and the reduction of negative feelings in moderately severe offences, when a person does not actively engage in attributional thinking.

A second possibility is that automatic and deliberative processes determine forgiveness in a sequential manner. Although the empirically established *association* between deliberative (e.g., attribution) processes and forgiveness may imply that deliberative processes lead to higher levels of forgiveness, it could just as well mean that a certain level of forgiveness influences the deliberative process. That is, it is possible that level of forgiveness may in fact be largely determined by the quicker automatic and implicit processes (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), which in turn may influence and guide the deliberative attribution processes (cf. Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Put differently, a deliberative attribution process may sometimes follow rather than precede an implicitly and automatically determined level of forgiveness.

This possibility is in line with the social intuitionist model of moral judgements (Haidt, 2001). In this theoretical model, Haidt seeks to explain how people make moral judgements; that is, how people come to evaluate a person's actions as either right or wrong. We suggest that two of the central processes of the model are applicable to the process of forgiveness (for a detailed description of the model; see Haidt, 2001). First, the model proposes that moral judgements appear in consciousness as a result of intuitive processes. That is, although people may be very consciously aware of how they judge a particular moral issue, this judgement is essentially based on automatic and effortless processes, occurring outside the person's awareness. Second, the model proposes that reasoning processes often occur

in a post hoc fashion, rather than that they *determine* moral judgement. Thus, whereas the judgement is often based on intuitive processes, people may engage in motivated moral reasoning to support an already-made judgement. Below we discuss how each of these two processes applies to forgiveness.

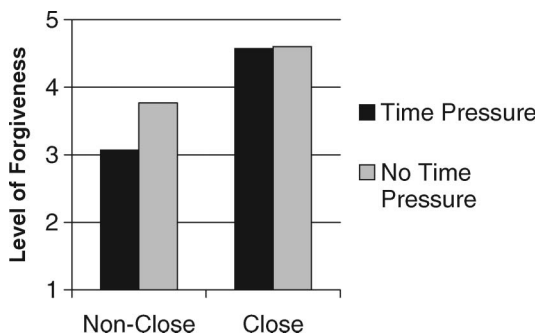
*The role of automatic and unconscious processes in forgiveness.* As with moral judgement, one's level of forgiveness is also likely to be determined by an automatic and unconscious (intuitive) process. As we have demonstrated, level of forgiveness regarding an offensive behaviour can be influenced outside the person's awareness by environmental cues that are essentially unrelated to the offence. Such findings clearly provide support for the proposition that automatic and unconscious processes at least partly determine level of forgiveness. Such findings are not only in accordance with the social intuitionist model that specifically focuses on how moral judgements are made. More generally, such findings are in line with a host of research findings, especially in the area of social cognition, demonstrating that most of our evaluations, judgements, and behaviours are largely automatically and implicitly driven (Bargh, 1994; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Zajonc, 1980).

A recent study by Karremans and Aarts (2007; Study 4) was designed to test the idea that, at least in close relationships, forgiveness does not entirely or necessarily depend on deliberative processes, but may result from an automatic process. As briefly noted, over the course of a relationship forgiving responses are likely to become fairly habitualised (Karremans & Aarts, 2007; Rusbult et al., 2005). At least towards relatively moderate—though hurtful—offences of the partner, a person may (explicitly or implicitly) “learn” that forgiveness is the best option in terms of serving both individual and relationship well-being. As a consequence, forgiving responses may occur in a relatively automatic manner, not necessarily mediated by mental events.

To test this idea, participants in this study were given a number of hypothetical scenarios in which either a close other or a non-close other (between-participants) offended the participant. Participants were asked to indicate their level of forgiveness regarding each scenario. Importantly, in order to reduce the possibility of controlled deliberative processing, half of the participants had to respond under time pressure. The remaining participants were given ample time to respond. In the non-close-other condition, findings from earlier research were replicated (e.g., Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994), in that participants responded with higher inclinations to forgive when they had ample time to respond as compared to when they had limited time. Under time pressure, participants seem to respond on the basis of their automatic, non-controlled reactions, which is to retaliate an offence.

However, and most importantly, in the close-other condition time pressure did not undermine people's relatively high inclinations to forgive the close other. That is, both in the time-pressure and no-time-pressure condition, participants responded to the offending close other with relatively high (and equally high) levels of forgiveness (see Figure 4). Put differently, even when cognitive resources were limited, an offensive behaviour of a close other still resulted in relatively high levels of forgiveness. These findings thus suggest that high levels of forgiveness that occur in the context of a close relationship are not necessarily driven by deliberative processes, but instead can arise in a fairly automatic fashion.

It is noteworthy that such findings are in line with an evolutionary perspective on forgiveness. Responding in a forgiving manner towards an offence of a close other is an important adaptive mechanism in maintaining close relationship bonds (De Waal & Pokorny, 2005; Godfray, 1992; McCullough, 2008). It is therefore not surprising that not only humans are capable of forgiving their offenders, but also apes, hyenas, and even bats seem to have the ability to forgive their offender—indeed, especially offenders who are close to them (Godfray, 1992; Wahaj, Guse, & Holekamp, 2001). Such findings are consistent with the argument that forgiveness does not need to be shaped by deliberative (e.g., attribution) processes per se. Although this does not imply that forgiveness could be completely uninfluenced by deliberative processes, it does suggest that forgiveness does not necessarily *depend* on such processes. Of course, we should note that forgiveness in animals is inferred from reconciliatory behaviour that is externally observed, and thus may differ from our analysis of forgiveness as an intrapersonal phenomenon.



**Figure 4.** Level of forgiveness as a function of relationship closeness and time pressure (data from Karremans & Aarts, 2007, Study 4).

*The forgiveness–attribution sequence.* As with moral judgements, it is possible that deliberative processes often follow one's level of forgiveness in a post-hoc fashion. When making a moral judgement, people often find it hard to verbalise the reasons why they think certain behaviour is moral or immoral. Similarly, people may often simply "feel" that they have or have not forgiven an offending partner for what he or she did, without having contemplated the reasons underlying the offender's behaviour. However, when asked, a person is likely to come up with reasons or attributions that are in line with his or her experienced level of forgiveness. That is, to the extent that someone's "gut feeling" tells him or her that the offender is forgiven, the person will be more likely to make benign attributions regarding the offence (e.g., "My partner was not responsible for her seemingly inconsiderate act after all"). In contrast, a person who still experiences anger and inclinations to retaliate, and thus does not experience forgiveness, will be more likely to make attributions of intent, guilt, and responsibility. Indeed, such post hoc attributions are especially likely to be made when one is explicitly questioned about the reasons that may underlie the other person's offensive behaviour, as is done in most studies examining the attribution–forgiveness link. Of course, taking part in a study on forgiveness is not the only time when people engage in post hoc reasoning. Generally speaking, people may engage in post hoc reasoning especially when the social environment demands some "justification" of one's current experienced level of forgiveness. For example, a person who is hurt by a romantic relationship partner may be especially motivated to justify and rationalise his relative lack of forgiveness when the partner has already made amends (e.g., "She may have apologised, but I am sure she did it on purpose!").

Thus, people may attempt to rationalise their current level of experienced forgiveness. Just as people may attempt to rationalise an intuitively based moral judgement (e.g., "Eating one's dead dog is wrong, it just is"; see Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). It seems plausible that the experienced level of forgiveness may for an important part be determined by intuitive processes, which in turn drive the deliberative processes that may justify the experience of forgiveness or unforgiveness. However we should acknowledge that, to date, there is no direct evidence in support of such an intuitive forgiveness–attribution sequence. This proposed forgiveness–attribution sequence is congruent with other bodies of literature which have suggested that reasoning processes are often affected by intuitive processes, and arguably more so than reasoning processes affect intuitive processes (e.g., Damasio, 1994; Wilson, 2002). An important challenge for future research is to disentangle these two processes, and to explore the different possibilities of how automatic and deliberative processes interact in determining forgiveness.



## THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Having explored the processes underlying forgiveness, the next question addressed in this chapter is: What are the consequences associated with the state of forgiveness? If the state of forgiveness is indeed so malleable, as the above findings suggest, is there any predictive power left to forgiveness? Even though situational influences may influence level of forgiveness, the fluctuations caused by such situational implicit input—although significant in statistical terms—may at first sight seem fairly insignificant in terms of its further consequences for the individual or the relationship with the offender. An important question therefore is whether such fluctuations may still cause changes within the person, and changes within the relationship. In the next section we will provide an overview of recent findings suggesting that even apparently small fluctuations in forgiveness can have significant effects on both the individual, the relationship, and even beyond.

### Intrapersonal effects of forgiveness

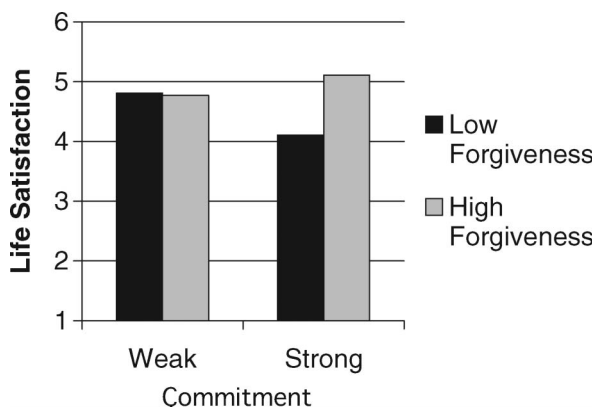
An important domain of forgiveness research is concerned with the question of whether forgiveness is related to psychological and even physical well-being on part of the forgiver. To many people this question may be considered a rhetorical one, to which the answer is “Yes, of course.” As an example, the late Ann Landers, who was one of the most popular writers of advice columns in the United States, once said: “One of the secrets of a long and fruitful life is to forgive everybody, everything, every night before you go to bed”. Moreover, the vast majority of the American population holds positive attitudes towards forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997). Also, many scientific researchers seem to be tempted to assume a priori that forgiveness is beneficial for all people in all situations (McCullough et al., 1997). It is therefore quite surprising that empirical evidence supporting the claim that forgiveness enhances psychological well-being is relatively limited.

One may wonder whether the effects of forgiveness on well-being are indeed so powerful as is sometimes assumed. However, a series of studies by Karremans et al. (2003) suggest that forgiveness can indeed be strongly and positively related to psychological well-being, but only under some circumstances. The authors argued that to fully understand the association between forgiveness and well-being one needs to take into account relationship-specific variables that characterise the relationship between “victim” and offender. Specifically, forgiveness should be especially related to psychological well-being in relationships of strong as compared to weak commitment. If a person is offended by a partner to whom she feels strongly committed, the *lack of* forgiveness is likely to result in a state of

psychological tension, which in turn would negatively affect her overall well-being. Psychological tension is likely to arise due to the conflict between a lack of forgiveness and strong commitment: Whereas strong commitment implies a long-term orientation, psychological attachment, and intent to persist in the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), the lack of forgiveness seems incompatible with each of these components of commitment. Hence Karremans et al. (2003) predicted that in relationships of strong commitment, forgiveness is likely to erase this psychological tension, which in turn will positively affect one's overall psychological well-being. Such a process is not expected in relationships of weak commitment.

Confirming this central prediction, a number of studies have indeed demonstrated that level of forgiveness was positively related to psychological well-being (operationalised in terms of state self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and more positive and less negative affect). For example, in one study (Karremans et al., 2003; Study 1) participants were asked to recall an offence that they had forgiven to a large extent, or in another condition were asked to recall an offence that they had not forgiven. This procedure was used based on the assumption that most people can think of offences that they have largely forgiven or that they still have not forgiven (cf. Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Participants came up with all kinds of offences, which had occurred in relationships ranging from weak commitment (e.g., one's football coach) to strong commitment (e.g., one's romantic partner). After they had written a paragraph to briefly describe the incident, participants reported how long ago the offence took place and how severe the offence was, and reported their level of forgiveness regarding the offence (as a manipulation check). Finally, they completed the measures of psychological well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, state self-esteem, positive and negative affect). Participants who recalled a forgiven offence reported higher levels of psychological well-being compared to participants who recalled a non-forgiven offence. But most importantly, this effect occurred only when participants recalled an offence by someone to whom they felt strongly committed. There was no effect of forgiveness on well-being when the offender was someone to whom one felt only low levels of commitment (see Figure 5, which depicts the results for life satisfaction). Important to note, these effects were obtained even after controlling for the severity of the offence and how long ago the offence had taken place.

Although these results were in line with the authors' hypotheses, it is possible that participants in the forgiveness versus no forgiveness study already recalled offences with others differing in level of commitment. Hence in another study the authors sought to manipulate current experienced level of forgiveness *after* participants had recalled an offence (Karremans et al., 2003; Study 3). Moreover, this study also examined the hypothesised mediating role of psychological tension. To manipulate forgiveness,



**Figure 5.** Life satisfaction as a function of level of forgiveness and level of commitment to the offending partner (data from Karremans et al., 2003, Study 1).

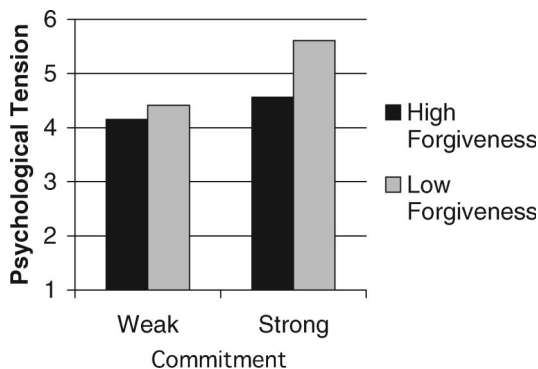
participants were merely led to believe that they had or had not forgiven their offending relationship partner. The instructions stated that, because people find it generally difficult to introspect on and thus to indicate their level of forgiveness towards an offender, US scientists had developed a “forgiveness test” which could assess a person’s “true” inner levels of forgiveness. In fact, the “forgiveness test” consisted of an adapted version of the implicit association task (IAT; for a detailed description see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). In the IAT participants had to respond to negative and positive words, and to a number of names, one of which was the name of the offender. Participants received false feedback regarding their response times. In the forgiveness condition participants were told that they had displayed faster responses when the name of the offender was coupled to positively valenced words than when the name was coupled to negatively valenced words, indicating that “at least at an implicit level, you seem to have forgiven the other”. In the no-forgiveness condition their responses were allegedly faster when the name of the offender was coupled with negative words than when the name was coupled with positive words, indicating that “it seems that you have not entirely forgiven the other”. After participants had read this feedback, they completed measures of forgiveness, psychological tension, and psychological well-being.

The forgiveness manipulation significantly affected participants’ temporary level of forgiveness, as indicated by higher reported levels of forgiveness in the forgiveness condition as compared to the no-forgiveness condition. As an aside, although the self-report measure of forgiveness was merely used as a manipulation check, it supports the proposition made earlier in this article that level of forgiveness can be very malleable. Furthermore, the forgiveness

versus no-forgiveness condition significantly affected reports of psychological tension. But most importantly, and in support of the central hypothesis, level of forgiveness was negatively associated with level of psychological tension only when participants had recalled an offence with someone to whom they were strongly (versus weakly) committed (see Figure 6). Mediation analyses demonstrated that the effect of forgiveness on psychological well-being (but only in strong-commitment relationships) disappeared when controlling for psychological tension. Put differently, when commitment to the offender was strong, high levels of forgiveness reduced psychological tension, which in turn positively affected psychological well-being. This process did not take place in relationships of weak commitment, where high versus low levels of forgiveness did not affect both psychological tension and psychological well-being.

At least three important conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, forgiveness is not by definition associated with psychological well-being. To understand the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being it is important to understand the relationship between the offender, and the person who suffers the offence. Second, the study in which level of forgiveness was directly manipulated demonstrates that even temporary changes in forgiveness as a result of an experimental manipulation can have consequences for an individual's current well-being. We suggest that not only experimentally induced changes in forgiveness affect well-being; more generally, we argue that changes in forgiveness as a result of situational cues (as demonstrated earlier in this article) can have temporary effects on well-being.

Third, although forgiveness may not always be positively related to psychological well-being, the above findings suggest that forgiveness can

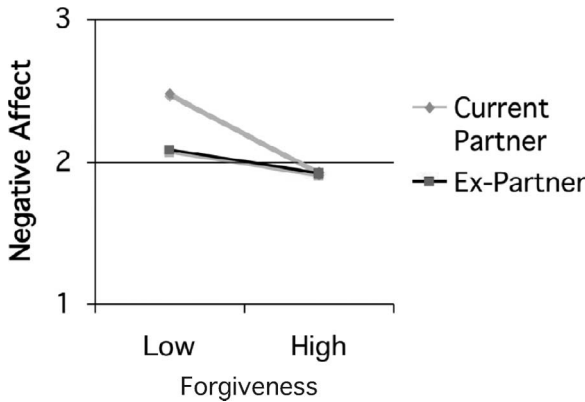


**Figure 6.** Psychological tension as a function of level of forgiveness and level of commitment to the offending partner (data from Karremans et al., 2003, Study 2).

have powerful effects on an individual's well-being when it occurs in a valued and committed relationship. Indeed, a recent series of studies revealed that level of forgiveness even regarding an act of infidelity by one's current romantic partner was positively associated with experienced positive affect, and negatively associated with experienced negative affect (Kluwer & Karremans, in press). Although incidents of infidelity are likely to have a profound impact on the victim's sense of trust in the relationship, partners may still want to continue their relationship. In such cases, the lack of forgiveness is likely to be associated with high levels of psychological tension, and forgiveness may diminish this tension and improve one's overall well-being. In line with the above findings, Kluwer and Karremans (in press) found that level of forgiveness regarding infidelity of an ex-partner was not associated with psychological well-being (see Figure 7).

Thus, these findings demonstrate that in close and committed relationships even forgiveness regarding severe offences can improve well-being. Having said this, we should acknowledge that there might also be boundaries to the beneficial effects of forgiveness in strong-commitment relationships. For example, if severe offences occur repeatedly (e.g., physical abuse), forgiveness is unlikely to improve one's well-being—in fact, it may do more harm than good.

Is forgiveness even associated with physical well-being? There is some correlational evidence that forgiveness is indeed related to health. For example, Seybold, Hill, Neumann, and Chi (2001) found that lower levels of dispositional tendencies to forgive were associated with poorer health habits, such as alcohol and cigarette use. Moreover, a study by Lawler et al. (2005) revealed that both level of dispositional forgiveness and level of



**Figure 7.** Experienced negative affect as a function of level of forgiveness regarding an ex-partner or current partner's infidelity (data from Kluwer & Karremans, in press, Study 2).

forgiveness regarding an actual past offence (i.e., state forgiveness) were negatively correlated with physical symptoms, number of medications taken, poor quality of sleep, fatigue, and somatic symptoms. Recently, Lawler, Karremans, Scott, Etlis-Matityahou, and Edwards (2008) demonstrated that participants who recalled a past offence exhibited higher blood pressure and heart rate to the extent that they reported lower levels of forgiveness, suggesting that forgiveness reduces stress responses to recalling an offence.

Apart from this correlational evidence, a study by Witvliet and her colleagues (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001) demonstrated the impact of temporary changes in forgiveness on physiological responses. Participants in this study were asked to recall an incident in which they felt hurt by someone, and subsequently were asked to simply *imagine* a forgiving response towards the offender, or to imagine an unforgiving response towards the offender. During these imagery tasks, participants' physiology was monitored, providing an on-line measurement of the immediate psychophysiological effects of participants' forgiving versus unforgiving thoughts. Participants did indeed report higher levels of forgiveness during the forgiving imagery phase than during the unforgiving imagery phase. Most importantly, these fluctuating levels of forgiveness were associated with a number of physiological changes. Higher levels of forgiveness (as compared to lower levels of forgiveness) were associated with less facial tension at the corrugator (brow) muscle region, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and less skin conductance—each a physiological indicator associated with physical health.

Thus, this study demonstrated that merely *imagining* forgiving versus unforgiving responses influenced temporary levels of forgiveness, which in turn influenced physiological responses. These findings may actually be a conservative estimation of what the effects of forgiveness versus non-forgiveness on health are in real-life. That is, if imagining forgiveness can already have beneficial effects in terms of reducing physiological responses that have been associated with health, then the effects of actual forgiveness on health in real life may be even more powerful. That is, participants in the study by Witvliet et al. (2001) were only temporarily reminded of an offence. However, in daily life people are particularly likely to be reminded of unforgiven offences, as the lack of forgiveness has been shown to be strongly associated with rumination (e.g., Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001a). Frequent reminders of the (unforgiven) offence may result in prolonged activation of the physiological system (i.e., high blood pressure, high heart rate, etc.), which in turn is likely to cause an array of diseases (e.g., Seeman, McEwen, Rowe, & Singer, 2001). In contrast, the results of Witvliet et al.'s study suggest that forgiving responses towards an offence can prevent or undo such detrimental health effects.

In sum, there is good evidence that forgiveness can have a significant impact on both psychological well-being and health. Based on the above findings by Karremans et al. (2003) it seems plausible that the health benefits of forgiveness are most pronounced when the victim has a strong commitment with the offending partner. That is, a person who experiences relatively high levels of forgiveness regarding a past offence is likely to experience more positive affect, less negative affect, higher self-esteem, greater overall satisfaction with life, is likely to have a lower blood pressure, heart rate, and skin conductance, and may actually have fewer physical and somatic complaints.

### Interpersonal effects of forgiveness

Relationships with close others—be it friends, family members, or one's romantic partner—are bound, even if only occasionally, to be marred by interpersonal conflict. That is, every now and then partners, intentionally or unintentionally, offend or hurt each other. They may break promises, gossip behind each other's back, divulge secrets of others that should not be divulged, lie about having extramarital affairs, or violate other relationship norms. As noted by Fincham (2000), one of the major challenges in people's interpersonal life is to deal effectively with such offences. That is, even if they might sometimes (or even often) be hurt by their relationship partners, people are at the same time strongly motivated to persist in these relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

If one wants to maintain a relationship, despite the offence, forgiving the offender seems functional in that it promotes the well-being and stability of the relationship. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the long-term effects of forgiveness. For example, a study by Paleari et al. (2005) demonstrated that high levels of forgiveness regarding a severe offence were associated with higher marital quality 6 months later. In a recent study examining the longitudinal associations between forgiveness in families and the quality of family experiences it was found that higher inclinations to forgive generally predicted a positive family environment 1 year later (Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelly, 2008).

An important reason for the functional role of forgiveness in relationship maintenance and relationship health is that it re-instigates pro-relationship motivation and behaviour. For example, Karremans and Van Lange (2004) demonstrated that participants who were reminded of a past offence that they had largely forgiven (compared to participants who were reminded of a largely unforgiven offence), were subsequently more willing to make a sacrifice for their partner, were more likely to accommodate (i.e., act in a pro-relationship manner) towards a destructive act of the partner (i.e., an act that was unrelated to the past offence), and were more likely to



cooperate in a social dilemma task with the partner. For example, in one study participants were reminded of a largely unforgiven offence, or a largely forgiven offence. After they had written a brief paragraph about the offence, participants wrote down four of the most important activities in their lives. Next, for each activity they indicated to what extent they would be willing to give up this activity for the sake of the relationship with the (offending) partner, which served as an indicator of willingness to sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997). Participants who had been thinking about a forgiven offence were more willing to give up these activities for the relationship with the offender than participants who had been thinking of an offence for which they had not forgiven the offender.

In another study (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; Study 3), using the same instructions of thinking of a forgiven or unforgiven past offence, after the recall phase participants played a (hypothetical) give-some dilemma with the offending person. Participants were given four coins, each worth 50 cents to themselves but worth 1 Dutch guilder to the other. Also, the offending person allegedly had four coins, worth 50 cents to the offender and worth 1 guilder to the participant. The participant was asked to decide how many of his/her four coins (s)he would give to the other, in a task where both the participant and the offending person were asked to exchange coins simultaneously. In this task, joint well-being is better served by exchanging more coins, and personal well-being is better served by giving fewer coins to the other. Thus, maximal cooperation is to give four coins, and minimal cooperation is to give zero coins to the other person (for a detailed description of the task, see Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994).

Results indicated that participants who had been thinking of a largely forgiven offence were willing to give more coins to the offending partner than participants who had been thinking of an unforgiven offence. These findings indicate that, whereas the lack of forgiveness is associated with acting on self-interested preferences (i.e., giving only a few coins), forgiveness seems to produce a shift towards acting on joint preferences (i.e., cooperation; giving more coins). More generally, such findings provide evidence relevant to the question of *why* forgiveness is so beneficial in terms of relationship persistence. For example, such pro-relationship responses help to sustain reciprocal cycles of pro-relationship motivation and behaviour between two partners (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Partner A's willingness to sacrifice, accommodation, and cooperation are likely to promote trust on the part of partner B, which in turn promotes partner B's commitment to the relationship. Partner B's commitment in turn promotes partner B's pro-relationship responses, which promotes trust in the relationship on the part of partner A, and so on. It is easy to imagine how an offence is likely to disrupt this cyclical pattern of pro-relationship

responses, trust, and commitment within the relationship. However, high levels of forgiveness regarding an offence may restore pro-relationship motivation and behaviour on the part of the victim, thereby re-establishing the reciprocal relationship-enhancing cycle between the two partners.

Thus, simply being reminded of a largely forgiven or unforgiven offence can motivate pro-relationship motivation and behaviour towards the offending partner in an essentially unrelated context. A related manner by which forgiveness has important interpersonal consequences is by restoring feelings of closeness between self and the offending partner. Higher levels of forgiveness regarding a past offence are related to higher levels of post-offence feelings of closeness with the offender (McCullough et al., 1998). Such restored feelings of closeness are subtly mirrored in the way people talk about their relationship with the offending partner. This was demonstrated in a recent study by Karremans and Van Lange (2008), who asked participants to recall either a forgiven or a non-forgiven offence. The offence was committed by a current significant other. Subsequently participants were simply asked to describe their relationship with the person who offended them. Participants who recalled an offence for which they had forgiven the partner, compared to those who recalled an unforgiven offence, used significantly more first person plural pronouns (we, us, our) to describe their relationship. For example, participants who had forgiven the offending partner were more likely to say "We met two years ago ..." In contrast participants who had not forgiven the offender were more likely to say "I met him two years ago ..." These effects remained even after controlling for level of commitment to the offender, severity of the offence, and how long ago the offence took place. Although such differences in language use are very subtle, they appear to be related to several indicators of relationship functioning (Acitelli, 1998; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Simmons, Gordon, & Chambless, 2005).

Thus, level of forgiveness regarding a past offence appears to be significantly related to relationship maintenance and health. Forgiveness not only re-establishes feelings of connectedness with the offender, it also promotes pro-relationship responses towards the offender that have beneficial consequences for the relationship, and even long-term benefits. As will be discussed in more detail below, it is plausible that the two mechanisms, restoring closeness and restoring pro-relationship motivation and behaviour, are strongly associated. For example, feelings of closeness may mediate the association between forgiveness and pro-relationship behaviour, although to our knowledge this possibility has not been tested empirically. In any case, in light of the inevitable offences that occur in interpersonal relationships, by promoting connectedness and pro-relationship behaviour the above findings add credence to the claim that forgiveness is a *key* factor in relationship maintenance and health.

## Generalised effects of forgiveness

As discussed above, there is good evidence in support of the idea that forgiveness yields important benefits to the individual (at least in committed relationships) and to the relationship. Another, perhaps equally intriguing, question is whether the psychological impact of forgiveness may even extend beyond the self or the relationship, and affect processes that are relevant to other people than the self, the other person directly involved, or the relationship between the two (e.g., Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2001). For example, is it possible that a state of forgiveness impacts a general prosocial orientation, such that it may encourage prosocial responses to other people in general? Also, is it possible that forgiveness promotes (or restores) not only a sense of connectedness with the offender, but also a sense of connectedness to other people more generally?

Research by Karremans, Van Lange, and Holland (2005) suggests an affirmative answer to these questions. Two studies examined whether level of forgiveness regarding a past offence would be related to a sense of connectedness or “we-ness” with other people in general. To examine this prediction, after participants had been reminded of a forgiven or unforgiven offence they continued with an alleged language task that was designed to measure a sense of “we-ness”. In this task participants read a text in a language unknown to them, which in fact was a non-existent language. In the text there were a number of blanks, and the participant’s task was to guess (based on their intuition) which personal pronoun was left out of the text. The rationale of this task was that to the extent that participants experienced a greater sense of connectedness, they would fill in a higher number of first person plural pronouns (we, us, our). In line with predictions, participants who had spontaneously recalled a forgiven offence used more first person plural pronouns in the task than did participants who had recalled an unforgiven offence, suggesting that higher levels of forgiveness are indeed associated with a higher level of general relatedness or “we-ness”.

In another study a general sense of relatedness was more directly measured with an adapted version of the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron et al., 1992). The measure in this study consisted of six pairs of circles, ranging in the degree of overlap from no overlap to almost complete overlap of the two circles. Participants indicated which of the six circles best described their feelings of connectedness towards other people in general. Again, participants who had recalled a forgiven offence felt more connectedness towards other people than did participants who had recalled an unforgiven offence. In both studies the effects remained significant after controlling for features of the offence (e.g., severity, how long ago the offence took place), features of the relationship (e.g., relationship commitment), and mood.

The next question examined in this research was whether these generalised psychological effects of forgiveness would translate into generalised prosocial *behaviour*? That is, are people who are reminded of a forgiven offence versus an unforgiven offence more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviour even outside the relationship with the offender? To test this prediction, participants were reminded of a forgiven or an unforgiven offence, as in previous studies. After they had written about the offence, and had answered some questions regarding the offence itself and regarding the relationship with the offender, participants were led to another room where they allegedly took part in a small survey for a charity organisation (Humanitas, a Dutch foundation that is, among other things, active in promoting home care, youth welfare, district visiting, care for the elderly, and care for the homeless.) After a brief description of the charity organisation, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to volunteer for the organisation. After the study we assessed actual donations in an anonymous manner: participants could donate money to Humanitas by putting money into a box when they left the laboratory.

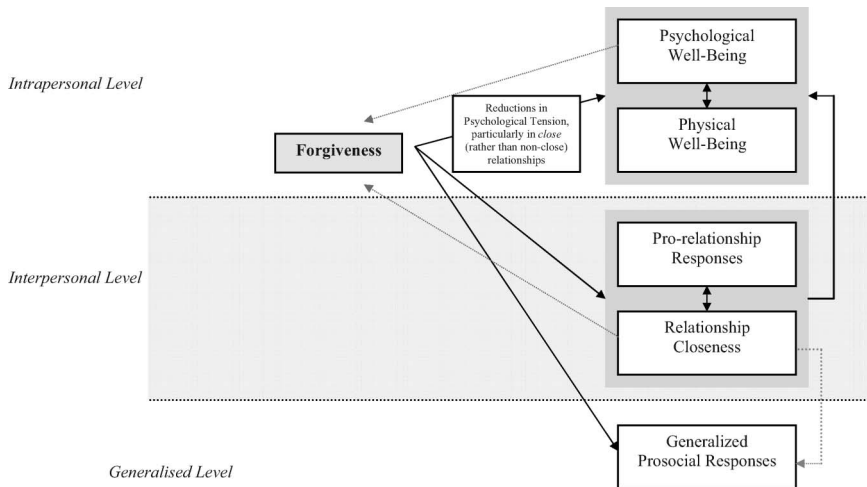
The results were quite striking. Participants who had recalled an offence that they had largely forgiven (compared to participants who had recalled an unforgiven offence) were not only more willing to volunteer for the charity organisation; they were also actually more likely to donate money for the organisation. These effects were observed even after controlling for mood, severity of the offence and when the offence took place, and features of the relationship (i.e., commitment) with the offender. Note that participants were randomly assigned to either the forgiveness or no-forgiveness condition. The relationship between forgiveness and both donation and willingness to volunteer could thus not reflect a general prosocial personality trait that underlies both the high levels of forgiveness and the greater likelihood of donating and willingness to volunteer (although such an association could exist, and is not incompatible with these findings).

These findings provide strong evidence in support of our claim of the “power” of forgiveness, as already introduced in the title of this chapter. Not only do they demonstrate that the intrapersonal experienced level of forgiveness is related to *actual* behaviour (an assumption that has received surprisingly little attention in the forgiveness literature), they also show that level of forgiveness may spill over even into prosocial behaviour that is not related to the offender. Put differently, high levels of forgiveness regarding a *private* interpersonal conflict may actually benefit others, who were not in any way involved in the offence, by creating a general prosocial mindset that results in actual prosocial behaviour. In contrast, the lack of forgiveness regarding a private interpersonal offence may restrain people from taking action that benefits others who actually have nothing to do with the offence.

We acknowledge that the lack of forgiveness regarding a single moderately severe offence that has occurred in the past is unlikely to have long-lasting effects on a person's general prosocial intentions and behaviour. However, repeated inability to forgive offences, or the lack of forgiveness regarding a very severe past offence, may importantly undermine a person's generalised prosocial motivation and behaviour, for example by increasing psychological tension (e.g., following from lack of forgiveness), by reducing general levels of interpersonal trust, or complementary mechanisms.

## SUMMARY AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The evidence that we have reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that simply recalling a forgiven versus unforgiven offence, imagining a forgiven versus unforgiven response, or even being led to believe that an offence is forgiven versus unforgiven, can exert a wide range of consequences, both at the intrapersonal and the interpersonal levels, and may generalise beyond the specific situation and person originally involved. Not only is forgiveness related to psychological well-being, relationship well-being, and interpersonal motivations, it also actually drives interpersonal prosocial behaviour. Although so far we have discussed the effects of forgiveness on each of these levels separately, we certainly do not wish to imply that these effects are empirically independent. Instead, in Figure 8 we provide a model in which



**Figure 8.** A model of the consequences of forgiveness. The model not only summarises the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and generalised effects of forgiveness as demonstrated in empirical research, but also represents theoretical links that require further empirical examination.

the above findings are summarised and organised, and propose links by which the consequences of forgiveness at the different levels may be dynamically interrelated. Although the above findings provide good support for some of the links in the model, other links have received less or no empirical attention so far, and thus lack empirical support. We therefore propose the model as a guide for testing hypotheses in future research.

As can be seen in the model, there may be two routes from forgiveness to psychological well-being: an *intrapersonal* route and an *interpersonal* route. The intrapersonal route describes how forgiveness can reduce the psychological tension that results from a combination of a lack of forgiveness and a strong level of commitment to the offender (Karremans et al., 2003). Furthermore, we propose that the concept of psychological tension, which arises from conflicting cognitions and emotions, is closely related to experienced stress, and should therefore have a significant impact on physical health as well (Lawler et al., 2008; Witvliet et al., 2001). We thus expect that the health benefits of forgiveness should be most pronounced in relationships characterised by strong commitment as compared to weak commitment, although this prediction needs further empirical investigation.

The second route describes how the association between forgiveness and psychological well-being may also result from interpersonal and dyadic processes between victim and offending partner. For example, the finding that forgiveness results in increased pro-relationship responses (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), suggests that it may restore a reciprocal pattern of pro-relationship responses within the relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). This in turn may restore feelings of closeness with the offender, which may directly feed into a person's experienced psychological well-being as decreased feelings of closeness (especially regarding a cherished relationship partner, e.g., one's romantic partner) may threaten fundamental feelings of belongingness. In short, forgiveness may positively affect the individual's well-being by restoring relationship functioning and concomitant feelings of connectedness. In line with this prediction, recent longitudinal studies revealed that the link between forgiveness and well-being is indeed mediated by feelings of closeness towards the offending relationship partner (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008). This research also provided some evidence for the reversed link between forgiveness and well-being, such that elevated levels of psychological well-being were predictive of increases in forgiveness, although more research is needed to examine this possibility further.

The model further suggests that the link between forgiveness and closeness, and the link between pro-relationship responses and feelings of closeness towards a relationship partner, are bidirectionally related (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004, 2008; McCullough et al., 1998).

For example, as described in the previous paragraph, it is possible that forgiveness instigates pro-relationship responses, which in turn promote feelings of closeness. However, it is also possible that the link between forgiveness and pro-relationship responses is mediated by feelings of closeness. That is, forgiveness may directly restore levels of closeness, which in turn would facilitate pro-relationship responses. Put differently, restored feelings of closeness as a result of forgiveness may “mentally prepare” a person to start responding in a pro-relationship manner towards the offending partner. Furthermore, a person who has forgiven a past offence, and is therefore likely to experience higher levels of closeness, will be more likely to forgive future offences of the partner.

Finally, we suggest that the effects of forgiveness at the broader generalised level (i.e., beyond the offended individual or the relationship with the offender) may ultimately be rooted in the interpersonal processes that are affected by forgiveness. As briefly noted, given that offences almost inevitably occur in interpersonal relationships (and especially in close relationships), a person who is repeatedly unable to forgive his or her offending relationship partners will find it difficult to maintain long-lasting and satisfying relationships. In the wake of an offence pro-relationship responses are likely to be inhibited, and can therefore also not be reciprocated. As a consequence, an unforgiving person is likely to develop low levels of trust in others. This reasoning corresponds with the idea that people who have experienced a serious interpersonal offence may sometimes become embittered, and may develop a rather cynical outlook on other people in general. The results of Karremans et al. (2005) suggest that this may result in decreased feelings of connectedness with others, and decreased feelings of willingness to take actions that benefit other people in general.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the present chapter we have provided a theory-oriented review regarding the nature and consequences of forgiveness. In the first part of the chapter we have shown that there is emerging evidence that forgiveness can be influenced in an unconscious manner. Such findings suggest that conceptualising forgiveness as only an intentional decision that is entirely mediated by deliberative processes is far less realistic than viewing forgiveness as a fairly malleable state that may very well be rooted in subtle reminders of the offence, the offending partner, the relationship, or even reminders that are actually unrelated to the offence. This notion of “malleability” is increasingly used to understand other phenomena, such as moral judgement. Given that literature, it is possible that deliberative and automatic processes jointly determine one’s level of forgiveness, but it is perhaps often the case that our cognitions serve to rationalise or verbalise



our automatically induced feelings that actually accounted for the triggering of variations in forgiveness.

The second part of the chapter provided an overview of studies suggesting the powerful consequences that forgiveness can have, despite the apparent malleability of forgiveness. Such findings suggest that the malleability approach is important, in that it contends that relatively subtle influences can have profound consequences, which suggests an impressive cost-effectiveness. If relatively small, inexpensive means can be used to yield some powerful effects of forgiveness, then the benefits of forgiveness for the forgiver (as well as for the offender and the relationship between the forgiver and offender) are likely to outweigh the costs. For example, if simple reminders of prosocial values like social justice can significantly increase an individual's level of forgiveness, such increases in forgiveness may already be associated (at least temporarily) with increases in psychological well-being, and may already increase prosocial motivation and behaviour towards the offender.

Based on the research findings discussed in this chapter, it is worth noting that relationship closeness appears to be a central factor in both the precursors and consequences of forgiveness. That is, relationship closeness seems crucial in predicting a person's level of forgiveness, as indicated by the finding that even when the concept of closeness is activated outside a person's awareness people tend to become more forgiving (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Moreover, the level of closeness towards an offender appears critical in understanding the association between forgiveness and psychological well-being (Bono et al., 2008; Karremans et al., 2003;). This central role of closeness in forgiveness fits well with a functional approach to forgiveness. In our evolutionary past, human survival depended to a large extent on the ability to form and maintain close bonds with others. The ability to forgive is likely to have evolved in order to maintain such close bonds, despite the conflicts and offences that inevitably may arise (for an extensive discussion of this reasoning, see McCullough, 2008). Hence, from this perspective, it is not surprising that people are especially likely (and sometimes even habitually likely) to forgive close others. Moreover, it may also explain why forgiveness is especially beneficial in terms of increased psychological well-being in close relationships as compared to less valued, non-close relationships.

Apart from the theoretical implications of our malleability approach for conceptualising and understanding forgiveness, we would like to close by outlining an implication concerning the methodology often employed in forgiveness research. Certainly, correlational self-report studies can be helpful in providing insight into the motives and goals that are associated with forgiveness, at least at an explicit level. However, to date, experimental studies that provide more insight into the causal processes leading to

forgiveness are under-represented in the forgiveness literature. Given the malleability of forgiveness, experimental studies seem very suitable for exploring the underlying motives and goals that make people more, or less, forgiving towards their relationship partners. If experimental studies demonstrate that a certain goal leads to temporarily higher levels of forgiveness, it stands to reason that this particular goal would also affect the process of forgiveness over time. For example, if the salience of a prosocial justice value unconsciously motivates people to forgive, as demonstrated in our experimental laboratory research (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005), a person's prosocial justice values are also likely to facilitate forgiveness over time. Of course, there are certainly limitations of this experimental approach. For example, most studies reviewed in this paper used hypothetical offences to examine people's inclinations to forgive. Another limitation concerns the temporal nature of forgiveness, in that forgiveness is generally a process that unfolds over time, and is not easily manipulated in the lab. Hence, ideally, researchers should combine longitudinal field studies with experimental laboratory studies to study forgiveness. Apart from having provided an overview of studies suggesting the malleability *and* power of forgiveness, we hope to have inspired other researchers to employ an experimental approach to examining the questions of when, why, and how people forgive their offenders, and how this leads to certain outcomes at the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, and beyond.

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